

HOW TO GENERALIZE GRICE'S THEORY OF CONVERSATION

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A teoria da conversação de Grice aplica-se a um certo tipo de conversação, cujo propósito é a troca de informações com a maior eficácia possível. A fim de aplicá-la a outros tipos de conversação, generalizando-a como sugeriu o próprio Grice, a especificação acima tem que ser modificada. O presente trabalho procura mostrar como isto pode ser feito. Empregando os conceitos da teoria dos atos de fala de Searle, as máximas conversacionais estabelecidas por Grice são chamadas de "assertivas". A seu lado existem máximas directivas, comissivas expressivas, declarativas, e de comprometimento. Um modelo para a generalização da teoria de Grice torna-se assim aparente. Embora o principal interesse da teoria de Grice resida na sua capacidade de oferecer (reconstruções de) interpretações de enunciações, há um grande número de enunciações que a teoria, tal qual formulada por Grice, é incapaz de cobrir. Exemplos de tais enunciações são apresentados, e mostra-se que com a proposta generalização das máximas de Grice seus significados podem ser reconstruídos. Isto ilustra a ampliação do potencial explanatório da teoria de Grice por meio da incorporação de outras máximas.

Grice's theory of conversation is designed for a kind of talk whose purpose is a maximally effective exchange of information. This specification is too narrow, if other kinds of talk are analyzed. As Grice himself has pointed out, his theory therefore needs to be generalized. This essay attempts to show how this could be done. Making use of concepts Searle has developed within his version of speech act theory, I call the conversational maxims established by Grice 'assertive', and I argue that there are directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative maxims of conversation too. A pattern for generalization thus clearly emerge. Though the main value of Grice's theory lies in allowing for (a reconstruction of) interpretations of utterances, there still remains a whole set of utterances whose meaning this theory has not yet been able to grasp. Mentioning a few examples of such utterances, I try to show how their meaning(s) can be reconstructed, if conversational maxims other than Grice's are recognized. That the explanatory potential of Grice's theory can be raised by incorporating further maxims should be illustrated in this way.

0. Introduction

Regarding the conversational maxims he established, Grice at a point, where the purpose of talk is at issue, says:

"I have stated my maxims as if their purpose were a maximally effective exchange of information; this specification is, of course, too narrow,

and the scheme needs to be generalized to allow for such general purposes as influencing or directing the actions of others" (Grice 1975, p. 47).

In view of this, it may perhaps seem surprising that a generalization remains a desideratum. Except for a proposal by Vanderveken (1985) which I shall comment on subsequently, no one, to my knowledge, has yet made the attempt to generalize Grice's conversation theory in the direction mentioned above, though critical dispute concerning this theory, as well as proposals for reformulation certainly have not been lacking (cf. Kempson 1975, p.157ff., Martinich 1984, p. 22ff.). The following considerations are aimed at rectifying this situation, in an attempt to link Grice's conversation theory to Searle's version of speech act theory.

1. *Comments on Vanderveken's Proposal*

My proposal, however, develops somewhat differently than Vanderveken's (1985). Considering the conversational maxims, he rightly declares: "Grice's maxims of quality, for example, are too restricted, and work only for assertive illocutionary acts" (Vanderveken 1985, p. 201); but thereupon Vanderveken states:

"I now propose to generalize Grice's maxim of quality within illocutionary logic in the following way: *The generalized maxim of quality*: 'Perform an ideal illocutionary act!' By definition, a speaker performs an ideal illocutionary act F(P) in a context of utterance if and only if the conditions of success, and the preparatory and sincerity conditions of F(P) obtain in that context and the propositional content is true" (Ibid.).

Regarding this proposal, I wish to note the following:

a) Vanderveken seems to assume that the maxims of quality relate to both the propositional content condition as well as the sincerity and the preparatory conditions. Based on the reconstruction of Grice's conversation theory, to be introduced below, I should like to suggest, in contrast, that the second of Searle's (1969, p. 66f.) preparatory conditions¹ be regarded as belonging to the maxim of relation, not to the maxim of quality.

b) According to Vanderveken's definition of the maxim of quality, something specific is to be *done* by the speaker. This becomes more apparent in view of the following remarks:

"From this generalized maxim, there follows a submaxim of quality for illocutionary acts with each possible illocutionary force, e.g. the

¹ . . . which says, e.g., that it "is not obvious to both *S* and *H* that *H* will do A . . ." (Searle 1969, p. 66).

following maxim for assertions 'Assert a propositional for which you have reasons, that you believe to be true and that is actually true', or the following maxim for promises 'Make a promise that you are capable to keep, that you intend to keep, that you will keep and that is good for the hearer' " (Vanderveken 1985, p. 201).

Formulations of this nature surely could be replaced, e.g. by such that would indicate what is *not* to be done. This seems to be desirable because the speaker particularly has to know what he should omit. As I wish to show in the next section (see Table 3 especially), there are some communication risks for the speaker if he does not observe the conversational maxims, and most of the maxims formulated by Grice are implicitly related to those risks. In general, Grice's maxims can be understood as a set of warning remarks; they focus on some kind of deviant behaviour the speaker sometimes tends to realize. Both the maxim formulations presented by Vanderveken and those presented by Grice refer to the conditions of success of certain speech acts. But Vanderveken's submaxim formulations say what the speaker should do (as if he does not know what to do actually), while most of Grice's maxim formulations (and those I shall propose) only say what the speaker should not do.

Though the difference between these formulations, at first sight, seems to be rather insignificant, the latter are preferable, because they do not prescribe anything at all. Due to their negative form they only say what has to be omitted. Formulations like those presented by Grice do not seem to select (or favor) any act of the speaker, they only limit the set of possible acts he could realize; they thus leave it to the speaker what to do.

For these reasons my formulations will be of negative form, i.e. will contain the word *not*. Moreover, they will try to indicate what is (not) to be *said* (instead of what is to be done). Conversational maxims expressing what is (not) to be said are more explicit, and, in addition to this, they are, I think, more simple than Vanderveken's formulations: they do not presuppose any acquaintance with speech act theory.

2. *Why Grice's theory of conversation ought to be generalized*

Generally, it may be assumed that the actual value of Grice's conversation theory does not consist merely in indicating that the cooperative principle and the maxims of conversation are fundamental to our discourse behaviour, or should at least be the basis of rational discourse behaviour. The main value of this theory lies in the possibility of employing it for the purpose of grasping the meaning of utterances, i.e. in allowing for (a reconstruction of) interpretations of utterances.

The explanatory potential of this theory is relatively high. If speaker S heeds to the cooperative principle, there are two fundamental possibilities:

- a) S is also following the maxims of conversation, or
- b) S is flouting them.

In view of these possibilities, an utterance of a sentence such as

1) Nigel has fourteen children.

may be given the meaning.

2) Nigel has *only* (i.e. not more than) fourteen children.

Given the condition that S observes the first maxim of quantity, i.e. that his contribution is not more informative than is required, (2) is indeed the standard implicature of (1).

Likewise, statement (3) means as much as (4):

3) Pass the salt, please.

4) Pass the salt *now*, please.

if one assumes that S is following the maxim of relation (cf. Levinson 1983, p. 106f.). On the other hand, utterances of sentences such as (5) and (6) could be seen as floutings of the first maxim of quantity (see Levinson 1983, p. 110f.), if one assumes that such utterances (sentences) are not particularly informative:

5) Either he does it or he doesn't.

6) Man is man.

On the basis of Grice's conversation theory, the meaning of utterances like these is relatively easy to comprehend (reconstruct), but there still remains a whole set of utterances the meaning of which this theory has not yet been able to reconstruct. For example:

7) I promise you a sound thrashing.

8) Get lost!

9) You've done a good job.

10) By all means, do continue to bang away as loudly as possible!

The interpretation of such utterances cannot be (adequately) reconstructed using the maxims established by Grice, because they violate maxims other than those cited by Grice. This should be clear regarding the ironically meant utterances (9) to (10), since these cannot be satisfactorily viewed as floutings of the first maxim of quality, "Do not say what you believe to be false". (Grice 1975, p. 46), if 'false' is understood in the "assertive" sense, as Grice presumably intended. In uttering (9) S, after all, does not want to make any assertion or to give any description of what his addressee has done. S thus does not say anything, and his addressee has not done anything that could be assessed as true or false. A conversational maxim as the above mentioned cannot reconstruct the meaning of (9).

Therefore, further maxims must be established so that the interpretation of utterances such as (7) through (10) may be properly reconstructed. For statement (9), for example, which is a case of "admonition by praise" (see Groeben/Scheele 1983, p. 33f.), it would be necessary to formulate an *expressive* maxim of conversation, such as "Don't say that (you like) p, if p isn't good. . . : " (see Table 10). Referring to p (9) seems to be some kind of praise. But if H, the addressee, who is responsible

for p , does not think that p is good, he cannot take S , though he has said that p is good, to mean that p is good. If S observes the cooperative principle, he must have conveyed something other than what he has said. Referring to such a maxim as the one just mentioned one could say that (9) could be understood as a case of flouting².

3. *Aspects of conversation Grice's theory is related to*

Before I subject Grice's conversational maxims to closer scrutiny, I should like to comment briefly on the cooperative principle which is commonly defined as follows:

"Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Grice 1975, p. 45).

If the point at issue therein is the accepted purpose (or accepted direction) of a talk exchange then the principle assumes that something other than the goal of the respective speaker is meant, for the speaker's goal may not necessarily coincide with the accepted purpose of the talk exchange. That a conversation may have (or has) an accepted purpose could, of course, mean that there is common knowledge among the speakers on what they have got themselves into: in a sales talk, this common knowledge would mean that one wishes to buy and the other wishes to sell something; in a small talk situation, the communication partners must know and bear in mind that their talk is not of an important or serious nature (for the time being). Among other things, the cooperative principle states, therefore, that the speaker should be aware of the *frame* of discourse when speaking.

But now let us turn to the conversational maxims. (I shall represent the following maxims in a way suggestive of Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, and I will do this in order to obtain (and provide) a general view).

²As "a general pattern for working out an implicature [the following] may be adduced:

- i) S has said that p
- ii) there's no reason to think S is not observing the maxims, or at least the co-operative principle
- iii) in order for S to say that p and he indeed observing the maxims or the co-operative principle, S must think that q
- iv) S must know that it is mutual knowledge that q must be supposed if S is to be taken to be co-operating
- v) S has done nothing to stop me, the addressee, thinking that q
- vi) therefore S intends me to think that q , and in saying that p has implicated q " (Levinson 1983, p. 113f)

Table 1

Grice's maxims of conversation (Grice 1975, p. 45f):

QUANTITY

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

QUALITY

(Try to make your contribution one that is true.)

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

RELATION

Be relevant.

MODALITY

(Be perspicuous.)

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
4. Be orderly.

Grice's conversation maxims (see Table 1) seem to address different aspects (and problems) of conversation. First, it must be stated that the maxims of quantity and of modality relate to the *content* of communication in different ways, while the maxims of quality and the maxim of relation deal, in different ways, with the *conditions* of communication. More precisely, the maxims of quantity relate to the *transmission* of the intended content, while the maxims of modality deal with its *presentation*. In contrast, the maxims of quality require speaker S to conform to the conditions that are constitutive of the given speech act. This can be deduced from the second maxim of quality, for having adequate evidence belongs to the constitutive conditions of an assertion, or at least to the sincerity condition of an assertion. If one considers Grice's (1975, p. 47) explanation: "I expect a partner's contribution to be appropriate to immediate needs at each stage of the transaction. . . .", then the maxim of relation, on the other hand, can be understood as an attempt to point out the necessity of *orientating* oneself according to the "reality" created by the speakers in the course of their interaction. I should like to describe this reality as "(inter)actional" in order to distinguish it from the coinciding, constitutive conditions of action. This actional reality which is perpetually subject to change must constantly be observed and evaluated by the speaker. Refer-

ring to Goldman (1970, p. 90) one could speak of the necessity of "monitoring"³. In the same manner as an actor generally checks his plan of action "in execution to see, if it still is in agreement with the original conditions [. . .], [in order] to reach, if necessary, a *reorientation* of the entire action or of its various components by plan revision" (Rehbein 1977, p. 218), so the speaker must also orientate himself according to the interactional reality, which is constituted by the actions of his "partner" (and which can be comprehended by way of monitoring), so that he is able to do what is appropriate and expected⁴.

Table 2 presents the aspects of conversation Grice's conversational maxims are related to

Table 2	
<i>Aspects of conversation Grice's conversational maxims are related to</i>	
Conveyance of the intended content of communication	
Adaptation to the conditions of communication	Orientation to the (inter)actional reality
Presentation of the intended content of communication	

³ Actional reality is not the only subject of a monitoring mechanism, and one can imagine that there presumably are more than one of such mechanisms. Dascal (1985, p. 454) for instance says that "one should expect that some sort of 'misunderstanding management system', comprising mechanisms for *preventing*, for *monitoring*, and for *correcting* misunderstanding (possibly three different subsystems or routines) be available to anyone engaging in conversation".

⁴ Surely, one may look at relevance from different angles. That is to say, one may distinguish between different types of relevance, such as Schütz (1971), e.g., does with the terms "thematic relevance", "interpretative relevance", and "motivational relevance". Dascal (1979, p. 155) differentiates between semantic and pragmatic relevance. Wilson/Sperber (1986) treat relevance primarily as a characteristic property of propositions and emphasize:

"we shall treat a proposition as relevant in the first instance, not to a text or discourse but to a context, where a context is a stock of information derived not only from preceding discourse, but also from memory, observation, and inference" (Wilson/Sperber 1986, p. 244).

At this point, the risks which arise by not following the conversational maxims may be briefly noted. Incidentally, the description of these risks (see Table 3) should illustrate, once again, that the quantity, as well as the modality maxims are more likely related to content, the quality and the relation maxims, on the other hand, are more likely related to communication conditions.

Table 3	
<i>Communication risks</i> (when not observing to conversational maxims):	
	Confusion
Error Delusion	Disorientation
	Collusion

Before I introduce the actual generalization of Grice's conversational maxims, I should like to indicate two further generalization possibilities. Grice (1975, p. 47) himself pointed out "that the specific expectations or presumptions connected with at least some of the foregoing maxims have their analogues in the sphere of transactions that are not talk exchanges". And, in fact, it appears that one can formulate some maxims, as well as a principle, which are valid for any (rational) action. The conversational maxims established by Grice may be viewed as special variants of the following maxims. In my opinion, Table 4 contains possible relevant formulations (and I should like to emphasize that these are not presented here with the intent to satirize):

Table 4

General principle of action (AP): Act according to your action's purpose

Maxims of Action:

QUANTITY

1. Do as much as necessary.
2. Don't do more than necessary.

QUALITY

Make sure that the conditions of your action are fulfilled.

RELATION

Don't do anything stupid.

MODALITY

Employ the proper means of action and apply them in the proper manner.

A further (here only alluded to) possibility for generalizing Grice's maxims of conversation results when the performance of a communicative action by means of linguistic expressions is taken into account. It is here that the relation of what someone says to the meaning of his utterance, in general, the relation of the meaning of the sentence to the meaning of the utterance, plays a role. He, who observes the maxims in Table 5, reduces (or avoids) the risks for communication, stated in Table 3.

Table 5

Maxims of linguistic action

Make sure that what you say is what you mean (intend to get across).

Make sure that what you say is (in your opinion) actually the case.

Make sure that what you want to say is what you (currently) should (must) say.

Pay attention to how you say what you mean (intend to get across).

These formulations demonstrate, once again, that the vertically situated maxims (which correspond to the maxims of quantity and modality) deal with the transmission and presentation of the intended content of communication, while the horizontally situated maxims (which correspond to the maxims of quality and relation) refer to the communication prerequisites.

4. *Generalizing Grice's theory of communication*

I should now like to approach the generalization possibility of Grice's conversation theory that, in my opinion, would be in accordance with the direction indicated by Grice. This generalization is the result of attempting to answer the following question: What would the conversation maxims have looked like, if Grice had not chosen the paradigm of the assertive but rather the directive, commissive, declarative, or the expressive speech act types? In view of what has been said hitherto, I should like to answer this question as follows: By favouring a different type of speech act, other than the assertive, the maxims of quantity would have remained untouched, even if they, at times, might have changed somewhat in meaning. Likewise, the maxims of modality would have remained. The maxims of quality, however, would comprise the first preparatory condition and the sincerity condition of the corresponding (directive, commissive, etc.) speech act types; the maxim of relation, on the other hand, would take on the shape of the second preparatory condition. (The content of this latter condition, of course, only represents one single case of interactional reality (unobviousness of a future action, for example)).

Naturally, this answer is based on the *interpretation* of Grice's conversation theory proposed here. It seems, though, to be quite in line with Grice's intentions. The definitions of tables 7-10 intend to demonstrate how the conversational maxims appear when directive, commissive, declarative, and expressive speech act types are taken into account. They refer to Searle (1969), as well as to the account of these speech acts in Searle/Vanderveken (1985). Table 6 shows the model according to which tables 7-10 have been generated.

Table 6

Model for the generalization of Grice's theory of conversation

QUANTITY

(see Table 1)

QUALITY

1. First preparatory condition (e.g. of directive speech act types).
2. Sincerity condition (e.g. of directive speech act types).

RELATION

Second preparatory condition (e. g. of directive speech act types).

MODALITY

(see Table 1)

Table 7

Commissive maxims of conversation

QUANTITY

(see Table 1)

QUALITY

1. Don't say that you'll do A, if (your addressee) H doesn't favour A.
2. Don't say you'll do A, if H doesn't want you to do A.
3. Don't say you'll do A, if you assume that (actually) you won't do A.

RELATION

Only say that you'll do A, if you assume that it is not obvious to H that you'll do A.

MODALITY

(see Table 1)

Table 8

Directive maxims of conversation

QUANTITY
(see Table 1)

QUALITY

1. Don't tell H to do A, if A can't be done.
2. Don't tell H to do A, if you don't believe H can do A.
3. Don't tell H to do A, if you don't wish A to be realized.
4. Don't tell H to do A, if you don't wish that A be realized by H.

RELATION

Don't tell H to do A, if it is obvious that H will do A or that A will happen due to other circumstances.

MODALITY
(see Table 1)

Table 9

Declarative maxims of conversation

QUANTITY
(see Table 1)

QUALITY

1. Don't say that p, if you're not in a position to say such.
2. Don't say that p, if you don't consider p possible.
3. Don't say that p, if you don't believe and want your statement to bring about (validate) p.

RELATION

Only say that p, if it is necessary to do so.

MODALITY
(see Table 1)

Table 10

*Expressive maxims of conversation*QUANTITY
(see Table 1)

- QUALITY
1. Don't say that p, if p isn't bad/good/regrettable etc.
 2. Don't say that p, if you (or H, the addressee) are (is) not responsible for p.
 3. Don't say p, if you don't sympathize with/if p doesn't even interest you.

RELATION
Don't say that p, if you don't assume that you were expected to say that p.

MODALITY
(see Table 1)5. *Examples*

The following utterances are given to briefly illustrate how the generalized theory works, i.e. how the meaning of each utterance can be reconstructed on the basis of the conversational maxims established in the previous section. Thereby, it should become clear that grasping the meaning of the following utterances or discourse elements in a manner which corresponds to Grice's, is dependent on such maxims of conversation, as cited above. Only on the basis of these (or similar) conversational maxims the utterance of such sentences can be treated (interpreted) in the same manner as Grice indicated.

In the examples following, only instances of flouting a maxim are taken into account, i.e. only cases in which the intended meaning of the utterance can only be determined when the fact that a conversation maxim was flouted has been taken into consideration. (Each flouted maxim is in parentheses following the respective sentence.)

- (11) I promise you a sound thrashing. (= sentence 7 above) (1. commissive (conversational) m(axim) of quality)
- (12) Get lost! (= 8) (1. directive m. of qual.)
- (13) We herewith appoint you president! (1. declarative m. of qual.)

- (14a) S: You're an idiot.
 (14b) H: Thanks a lot for the compliment! (1. expressive m. of qual.)
 (15a) S: I'm going to travel to Naples with Martina.
 (15b) H: Congratulations! (1. expressive m. of quality)
 (16) You've done a good job. (= 9) (1. expressive m. of qual.)
 (17) (Newlywed to his wife): I promise always to remain faithful to you (cf. Searle 1969, p. 59). (commissive relevance maxim)
 (18) By all means, do continue to bang away as loudly as possible! (= 10) (1. directive m. of qual.)
 (19) You should definitely let yourself be elected! (2. directive m. of qual.)
 (20) I'd do just anything for you! (1. commissive m. of qual.)

The irony of (15b), for example, stems from the fact that H is approving something with his utterance that he does not at all find commendable, to that extent, therefore, the first expressive conversational maxim of quality has been violated. An offense against the first commissive maxim of quality may be noted in (11), for example, because an action is being promised which the hearer does not find acceptable. The irony of (13) is due to the fact that the speaker is not authorized to appoint.

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